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SIPDIS

ABU DHABI -- PLEASE PASS TO NEA A/S WELCH

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SUBJECT: A CALM ELECTION DAY IN ISRAEL -- SHOPPING,
SAILING, AND SOME VOTING TOO (C-NE6-00442)

1. Summary: Entering the evening hours of election day in Israel, the prognosticators of voter apathy are claiming victory. Only 47 percent of the electorate had voted as of 1800 (local time), by which time -- historically speaking -- well over half the electorate usually would have cast their ballots. For example, in 2003, which marked the nadir of Israeli participation in Knesset elections with 69 percent total turnout, 54 percent of the electorate had voted by 1800. With four hours left until polls close, some ground may be made up as voters come back from the malls, the beaches and the bars after a day off in generally pleasant weather, but a low turnout in this election is all but a given, according to political contacts in the major parties. End Summary.

THE MAJOR PARTIES DISCOURAGED BY LOW TURNOUT

2. Labor Party Advisor Oriella Ben-Zvi told poloff that she was with Labor Party Chairman Amir Peretz in the south, and that in certain places, such as his hometown of Sderot, Peretz had been very warmly received. She said that in the smaller localities, where people know each other, the turnout is much better than in the cities. Overall, however, the voter turnout was not as good as they had hoped for, according to Ben-Zvi. She assessed that many of Kadima's supporters, as well, may not be motivated enough to vote. In contrast, she said, supporters of smaller parties are more motivated. She said that she had heard a lot of talk while she traveled that the small Pensioners' party is taking votes away from Labor. She speculated that the main headlines tomorrow would be about what she anticipates will be a the historically low voter turnout. Oren Helman, a Likud advisor, and Likud Central Committee member David Sharan echoed this assessment in separate discussions with poloff. Kadima organizer Yaron Sharaby told poloff that total turnout would definitely be lower than in 2003. While not upbeat, Sharaby confided that he thought Kadima would come out "all right." Yohanan Plesner, a Kadima candidate on the cusp -- slot 32 -- told Haaretz that "we have between 33 and 40 seats." Plesner's aide told poloff that Kadima activists are heading to the malls to get out the vote.

ATMOSPHERICS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

3. Israelis in the greater Tel Aviv area went for walks, visited malls in the Herzliya suburb and downtown Dizengoff center to profit from special election-day discounts, and practiced kite-sailing along the coastal beaches in sunny weather that defied projections of rain. These diversions account in large part for the Israeli preference to vote in the evening.

No Arab boycott, but turnout no better than the norm...

4. Post's PD Arabic-speaking FSN in Nazareth reported general calm in what is the largest Arab-Israeli city in Israel. Israeli-Arab voter participation, at mid-afternoon, mirrored national averages. Azmi Bishara's Balad party reportedly hired buses to bring thousands of Israeli Arabs from their studies in Jordan home to vote in Israel. While some small villages, such as the Druze village of Isfiya, in the Upper Galilee, reported below-average turnouts, participation in other, larger cities, such as Haifa, tracked with that of Nazareth, according to Arabic print media. The Mayor of Sakhnin, Mohammed Bashar, told poloff that the voter turnout by late afternoon in Sakhnin was only 30 percent and characterized the situation of low voter turnout as bad for Arab parties. In Jaffa, a mixed Jewish-Arab city that was the scene of scuffles last week between Arabs and right-wing Jewish extremists from the Herut Party who were raising money to finance Israeli Arab emigration from Israel, the situation is calm. The only political noise reported was from the Shas party, which has tried to gain supporters from beyond its ultra-Orthodox corner.

The Russians Still Prefer Lieberman

15. The southern port city of Ashdod is home to a mostly Russian-speaking immigrant community. A Russian-speaking econoff who visited several polling stations observed both families and many under-30 voters coming to vote. Here, too, the participation rate by mid-afternoon mirrored national averages, according to FSN contacts. Post's Russian-speaking PD FSN who lives in Ashdod reported that this election was calmer than most -- both on the street and in the Russian-language media. Like their more affluent, native brethren in the Tel Aviv suburbs, many Russian-speaking immigrant families headed for the malls before heading to vote, according to the FSN. A baker confided to her that going to work provided him with a good excuse not to vote. Avigdor Lieberman's name and party (Yisrael Beiteinu) was on the mind of many Russian-speakers, according to the FSN's anecdotal surveys, but the noise heard most in the streets came from the ultra-Orthodox, mostly-Sephardic Shas party. In the Russian area of Bat Yam, closer to Tel Aviv, older voters told a Russian-speaking consoff that they would vote for Lieberman, whom they described as a "man of action." Other Russian voters told consoffs that they would vote Kadima as a protest against "the politicians," namely, they said, Likud Party Chairman Binyamin Netanyahu.

Anti-Zionists protest

17. Israeli media have covered extensively the disturbances by some 30 anti-Zionist, ultra-Orthodox protesters in Beit Shemesh. These anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox were forcibly removed from a polling station after they reportedly urged voters not to cast their ballots in the Israeli elections. In other ultra-Orthodox communities, such as Bnei Brak, Embassy officers report the active participation of rabbis telling people to vote for the mostly Azkhenazi Torah and Shabbat Judaism party (former UTJ). In Bnei Brak, the anti-Zionist impact was limited to a few empty voting stations.

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JONES